



*Bennett Beach*



*Eighteen Mile Creek Gorge*

*Hunters Creek Park*



## 3.0 OVERALL SYSTEM FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COUNTY PARK SYSTEM

Since the establishment in 1925 of the County Parks Commission, and the subsequent acquisition and development of the four original County parks, the underlying purpose of the parks system has been consistent – providing recreation opportunities in naturalistic settings on a county-wide basis, and preserving open space and unique natural features that are beyond the means of local governments to provide or maintain.

For the most part, the evolution of the County park system demonstrates these objectives, and the parks highlight the area's significant scenic and natural features. The original parks of Chestnut Ridge, Emery, Ellicott Creek, and Como Lake were strategically located to take advantage of the area's unique forests and waterways. The acquisition of Akron Falls Park, with its dramatic waterfalls, and the later addition of Eighteen Mile Creek Park, Hunters Creek and Franklin Gulf lands, preserved significant features afforded by the dramatic topography of the Onondaga and Portage Escarpments. The acquisition of Wendt Beach in the 1960's and Bennett Beach Park in the 1980's provided for waterfront recreation and ensured the retention of significant beach and dune environments in the public interest. At the same time as the park system was developing, the County was acquiring land and reforesting substantial areas of abandoned farmland, for timber harvesting and conservation purposes. The forest lots represents almost one third of the County's land holdings today.

Over the years, as urbanization of the outlying County areas has taken place, increasing demands for recreation activities has led to the addition of a variety of facilities within the County park system. In parks such as Como Lake and Ellicott Creek, passive recreation areas and open space have been replaced by sports fields, tennis courts, playgrounds and other facilities, with extensive roadways and parking to

serve them. The County parks also includes such specialized facilities as a ski hill, golf courses, and toboggan chute, along with sports fields that are used by local community groups. Although several additional County park sites were acquired through the 1970's to address the increasing population, these parks remain primarily undeveloped, with the exception of a few trail systems.

The Erie County Park system today is a substantial network that includes developed parkland, waterfront properties, and extensive conservation lands. The amassed land-base is impressive, as is the range, quality, and uniqueness of the natural, scenic and cultural heritage features that the sites encompass. Many are comparable to State Parks. The parkland and reserve lands are well distributed throughout the County, and by previous reports the system is well utilized by residents throughout the seasons. As a system, the Erie County Parks have the potential to be marketable as a tourist destination, providing the significant resources are preserved and maintained.

The challenges facing the Erie County Parks System are, however, many. Although extensive land has been assembled over the years, new park development has not kept pace, increasing the usage of the existing multi-use parks, and placing demands on them to provide 'something for everyone'. The County has continued to acquire parkland, including the Botanical Gardens within the Olmsted-designed South Park, along with other smaller and less notable properties. Past Master Plans have recommended substantial parkland improvements, additional recreation facilities, and new parks development. Fiscal resources however, have not kept pace with the operational and capital requirements of the existing developed parkland, and significant investments are now needed to maintain and protect the park infrastructure, particularly the heritage structures. There is increasing pressure to open up undeveloped parkland for recreation activities, while the forests and natural environment areas in the developed parks are in need of appropriate management to ensure their sustainability.

At the same time, recreation opportunities have increased at the local level, as suburban areas have developed. In keeping with contemporary design standards, new community areas include neighborhood walk-to parks, with facilities for young families.



*Como Lake Park*

*Current North American trends in recreation and leisure indicate a growing interest in nature-based, and non-structured recreation activities that support an aging population.*



*Multi-use trail in Ontario*





*Franklin Gulf Park*

Larger Town / Village parks are being developed exclusively for active playing fields, to accommodate organized sports leagues. Current North American trends in recreation and leisure indicate a growing interest in nature-based, and non-structured recreation activities that support an aging population. Cycling and walking rank within the top recreation activities. Mountain biking, snowmobiling, and other linear trails-based activities have become increasingly more popular and are supported by active organizations.

## **3.2 MISSION AND GOALS**

With today's fiscal limitations, and changing expectations in recreation service delivery, it is appropriate that the County revisit the mandate of the County Park system to ensure that it continues to fulfill its original objectives, while remaining a viable and sustainable entity for future generations. Based on the County Park System's historic role in recreation service delivery, a *Mission Statement* was affirmed. Accordingly, the *Goals and Objectives* of the 1988 Master Plan were reviewed for their appropriateness and refined to be relevant to this mandate.

Review and updating of existing park concept plans, and recommendations for parks development and upgrading are components of this Master Plan. In determining an appropriate level of development, it is first important to identify a *parks classification system* that defines the role and function of existing land holdings, as well as serving to guide the acquisition of new parkland to supplement or fill gaps within the system.

### **3.2.1 MISSION STATEMENT**

Through the study process, the following *Mission Statement* was affirmed:

*The Erie County Park System has traditionally been positioned to fill a niche in the regional parks and recreation framework. Specifically the County park system has emphasized the provision of recreation activities and facilities in natural environment areas as an alternative to localized park settings.*

The role of the County Park System shall be:

- *To provide residents opportunities to enjoy recreational pursuits in natural settings on a year-round basis;*
- *To protect regionally important areas of scenic, environmental, and cultural heritage significance;*
- *To contribute to the economic vitality of the County, and;*
- *To promote public awareness of the resources available within the park system.*

### 3.2.2 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The 1988 Master Plan identified fourteen Goals for the Erie County Park System that represent general principles, along with sixty-seven supporting objectives, that provide detailed guidelines on park standards, physical improvements, operations and maintenance, and administrative functions. A number of these objectives pertaining to per capita standards and driving distances have been achieved, and the parks system may now be better served by a new policy framework that reflects contemporary recreation trends, the significant natural and cultural resources that are contained within the park system, and the values that will ensure their protection, enhancement and sustainability.

The refined Goals and Objectives are provided in the sidebar.

#### GOAL 1:

*Build a connected County-wide system of parks, trails, and greenways for environmental conservation and recreation purposes.*

##### OBJECTIVES:

- *Utilize planning and land-use policies to identify and secure significant waterfront lands, river and stream corridors, greenways, and significant natural environment areas wherever possible.*
- *Investigate opportunities with public and private sector partnerships to provide public access to lands that contribute to a County-wide open space system.*

#### GOAL 2:

*Provide and maintain parks and recreation programs that meet the needs of County residents and are not typically provided by local, state or national parks, or private recreation providers.*

##### OBJECTIVES:

- *Provide facilities primarily for self-directed, resource-oriented outdoor recreation, that complement the unique and natural features of each site.*
- *Provide well-designed and maintained facilities that respect the character, resources, and carrying capacity of the park, and that are consistent with the Mission statement.*
- *Provide for four-seasons use within the park system.*
- *Provide facilities, programs, and activities that serve a wide range of users.*
- *Provide opportunities for family-oriented gatherings and group assemblies.*

#### GOAL 3:

*Preserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage resources within the park system*

##### OBJECTIVES:

- *Identify, designate, protect and restore, significant natural areas and historic sites and structures.*
- *Identify and implement measures to manage and enhance environmental resources, i.e. forest management, fisheries and other wildlife enhancement.*

- *Ensure that facilities development, recreation activities, and maintenance practices are undertaken in a manner that is compatible with resource protection.*
- *Provide staff training on issues of resource management and protection.*

#### **GOAL 4:**

*Ensure accessibility of the park system for all County residents.*

##### **OBJECTIVES**

- *Provide facilities that require little or no user cost.*
- *Improve handicapped accessibility to all park facilities.*
- *Limit high cost or large area specialized facilities used primarily by special groups.*
- *Facilitate and promote use of public transportation, where feasible.*

#### **GOAL 5:**

*Ensure sustainable and cost effective park and recreation service delivery.*

##### **OBJECTIVES:**

- *Identify and implement a financial plan that ensures the long term, management and maintenance of the parks system.*
- *Ensure fiscal responsibility in the management and operation of parks and facilities.*
- *Build partnerships with public agencies, private businesses, non-profit organizations, and citizen volunteers.*
- *Pursue grants from state, federal and private sources.*
- *Improve efficiencies and skill levels in parks operations, management and maintenance practices.*
- *Utilize advancements and improved technologies in parks and facilities management.*
- *Adopt a policy on the acquisition, disposition and development of parkland.*

### **3.3 PARK CLASSIFICATIONS**

Recognizing the diversity and variety of uses within the County parks, a park classification system is recommended for the Erie County Parks System. The classifications will serve as a guide to the ongoing management and use of the existing parks and open space lands, and the future development of new ones. It is recognized that within the existing park system, parks may share some of the characteristics of other park categories.

The following park and open space classifications are proposed:

- **HERITAGE PARKS**
- **WATERFRONT PARKS**
  - *Destination Parks*
  - *Windows on the Water*
  - *Linkages*
- **SPECIAL PURPOSE PARKS**
- **CONSERVATION PARKS**
- **FOREST MANAGEMENT AREAS**

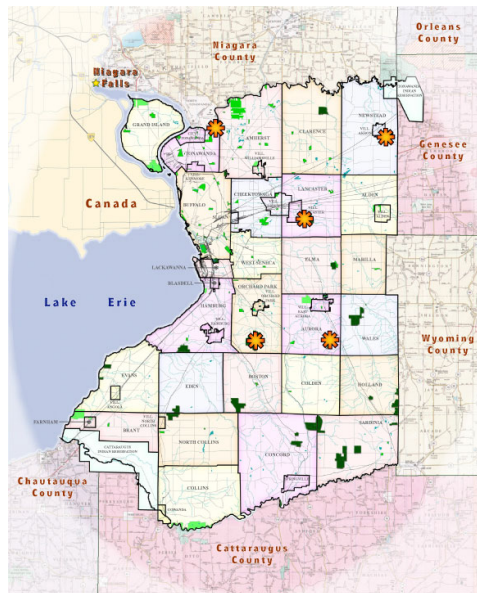


*Historic Shelter - Ellicott Creek Park*

### 3.3.1 HERITAGE PARKS

Heritage parks are represented by the four original ‘county parks’: Chestnut Ridge, Emery Park, Como Lake, Ellicott Creek (c. 1925/26) and Akron Falls (constructed as Village Park in late 1920s - acquired by County c. 1948), which are examples of integrated sites

with significant scenic, natural and historic significance. Each of the parks has unique, man-made structures of unmatched historical character and beauty, constructed as part of the WPA movement. These oldest parks deserve consideration on the “National Register of Historic Places,” similar to the Olmsted Parks System in Buffalo.



*Heritage Park Locations*

#### ROLE AND FUNCTION

- *Primarily natural environment and picnic parks with a focus on environmental systems and cultural heritage preservation and passive recreation.*

#### FACILITIES

- *Conservation lands and natural areas;*
- *Emphasis on passive recreational activities, such as hiking/walking trails, strolling paths, open space, picnic shelters, and limited ancillary facilities such as playgrounds and informal play fields; (Note: Limit “active” recreation to those ballfields, courts and facilities already existing.)*
- *Equestrian trails where existing and not compromising the natural environment.*

#### MANAGEMENT FOCUS

#### GOAL 6:

*Promote economic and tourism potential of the park system, in particular the waterfront and heritage parks*

##### OBJECTIVES:

- *Ensure maintenance and upkeep of the park’s significant natural and historic features.*
- *Market the County system’s unique scenic, environmental and heritage qualities.*
- *Develop cross-marketing opportunities with the State, local towns and cities, neighboring Counties, and other area attractions.*
- *Establish a unified and readily identifiable image for the parks system that is reflected in facilities development, signage and marketing materials.*
- *Promote understanding and use of the parks through events programming.*

#### GOAL 7:

*Build an effective public outreach strategy that promotes volunteerism and land stewardship*

##### OBJECTIVES:

- *Increase public awareness of the unique natural and cultural heritage resources through public education and interpretive programs, brochures and signage.*
- *Encourage volunteerism, land stewardship and resource management by citizens and community organizations. All volunteer efforts shall be coordinated with Parks Department staff and Union representatives.*
- *Pursue cooperative partnerships and maintain regular coordination with governmental agencies and non-profit organizations with an interest in the county parks and recreation system.*
- *Utilize a variety of media and technologies in the dissemination of information.*





## ROLE AND FUNCTION

- *Waterfront recreation;*
- *Natural and cultural heritage preservation.*

## FACILITIES

- *Water-based and beachfront recreation amenities suited to the site's conditions, special features and ecology;*
- *Picnic areas, trails, ancillary facilities such as parking, washrooms, concession, to support waterfront recreation uses.*

## MANAGEMENT FOCUS

- *Maintaining the integrity of the natural environment through conservation and land management practices*
- *Restoring historic buildings.*
- *Identifying park management zones: active areas, passive areas, natural environment areas.*
- *Consolidating park facilities, e.g. simplifying park circulation routes, removing/relocating active recreation facilities.*
- *Encourage volunteer work efforts to augment the current Parks Department staff responsibilities.*
- *Establish an interpretive signage and educational program that can highlight the wonderful natural features along the Lake Erie Shoreline, Buffalo and Niagara Rivers, Erie Canal and other notable waterfront settings throughout the park system.*



*"Window" to the Buffalo River at Smith Street Park*

## WINDOWS ON THE WATER

- *Facilitate public access and views to the lake and riverfront –understanding that a direct shoreline trail may not be feasible throughout, however a roadside trail with occasional "windows" punched through to the lake and river is very possible;*
- *Provide relief in the urban fabric.*



*Riverwalk, looking south across from the Chevy Plant in Tonawanda*

## LINKAGES

- *Contribute to a continuous connected public waterfront, i.e. Isle View Park, Tow Path, Riverwalk, etc. with connections to other regional systems such as Ellicott*



- *Trail, viewing areas and other waterfront related amenities, subject to environmental considerations, i.e. boat launch, fishing pier.*

**Niagara County**

**Niagara Falls**

**Canada**

**Lake Erie**

**Niagara County**

**Orleans County**

**Genesee County**

**Wyoming County**

**Chautauque County**

**Cattaraugus County**

Parks with a special purpose, based on unique characteristics, or fulfilling a specific function within the recreation delivery system,



## ROLE AND FUNCTION

- ## FACILITIES

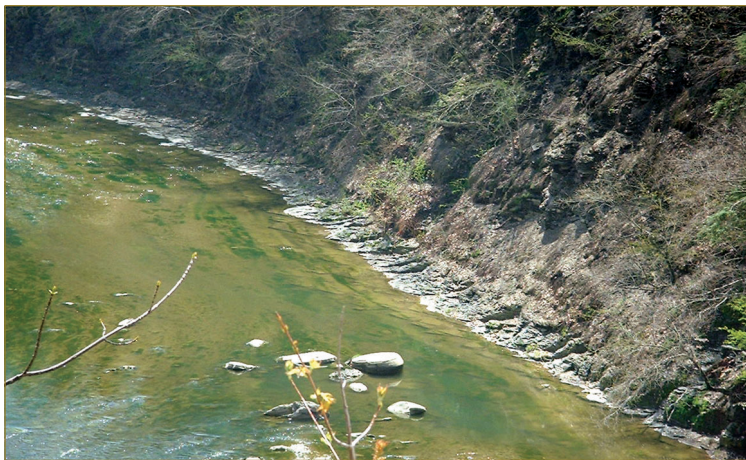
- *Varies according to purpose.*

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- *Varies according to purpose;*
- *Addition of new properties should reflect the Mission Statement.*
- *Encourage volunteer work efforts to augment the current Parks Department staff responsibilities.*
- *Establish an interpretive signage and educational program that can highlight the unique natural and historic features throughout these parks.*

### 3.3.4 CONSERVATION PARKS

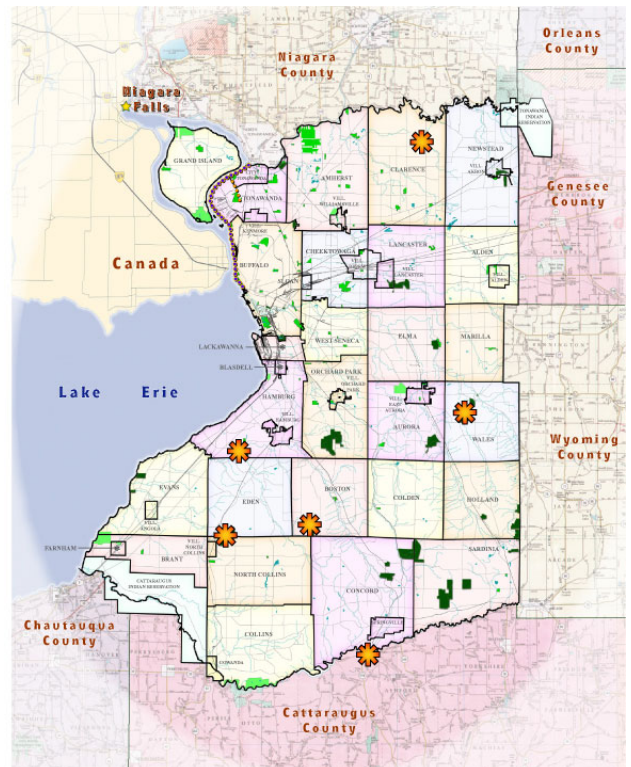
*Formerly undeveloped parks, these lands are to generally remain in a natural state. The primary purpose of these sites is for conservation of the natural environment, and nature-based recreation activities,*



*i.e. Hunter's Creek, Beeman Creek, Eighteen Mile Creek, Franklin Gulf, Scoby Dam, Boston Forest. These parks were originally purchased by Erie County to provide future recreational areas as population grew and demand warranted.*

#### ROLE AND FUNCTION

- *Management and enhancement of environmental resources, i.e. forest management, fisheries and other wildlife enhancement;*
- *Self-directed, resource-oriented outdoor recreation, that complement the unique and natural features of each site, without compromising the environmental integrity,*



*Conservation Park Locations*

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*i.e. fishing, nature enjoyment, trails uses.*

#### FACILITIES

- *Conservation lands and natural areas;*
- *Trails of a type suited to park environment, with hierarchy based on types of use and skill level;*
- *Low-key supporting facilities such as trailheads, modest comfort facilities (restrooms), informal parking areas, information/interpretive kiosks, directional/way finding signage;*
- *Modest facilities for outdoor education programming, e.g. open-air shelters.*

#### MANAGEMENT FOCUS

- *Protection of important natural and cultural heritage features;*
- *Identifying appropriate use areas and trail routes;*
- *Encourage multi-use trails wherever possible and appropriate to serve the greatest number of users; Separate trail uses where necessary if conflict is unavoidable;*
- *Perimeter landscape buffers in appropriate locations;*
- *Trails management and safety measures.*
- *Encourage volunteer work efforts to augment the current Parks Department staff responsibilities. This would include trail building, maintenance and patrolling.*
- *Establish an interpretive signage and educational program that can highlight the wonderful natural features throughout these parks.*
- *Establish a “Carry-in / Carry-out” trash policy within these scenic and natural park settings.*



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### 3.3.5 FOREST MANAGEMENT AREAS

*Former forest lots comprised primarily of plantation forests. These lands may have future potential for commercial resource management activities.*



#### ROLE AND FUNCTION

- *Management and enhancement of environmental resources, i.e. forest management and wildlife habitat;*
- *Resource management for possible revenue generation.*

#### FACILITIES

- *Access roads for resource management purposes;*
- *Modest facilities for resource management and/or outdoor education programming, e.g. informal parking lots or bus drop-offs, open-air shelters.*

#### MANAGEMENT FOCUS

- *Maximizing resource management opportunities while preserving habitat and environment, and long term sustainability;*
- *Identifying opportunities for outdoor education and interpretation programs that focus on resource management. Develop interpretive signage programs to educate the public.*

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- *Encourage volunteer work efforts to augment the current Parks Department staff responsibilities. This includes a focus on Environmental-based and Conservation-based organizations that will preserve and enhance these natural settings.*